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WITHOUT CLEAR OBJECTIVES: OPERATION EARNEST WILL

By

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A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of the paper constitute my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

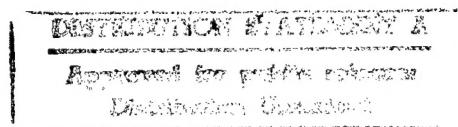
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Abstract

This paper conducts a critical analysis of U.S. political and military objectives in the Persian Gulf during the Iran-Iraq War, focused on Operation Earnest Will. The background of the Iran-Iraq War is reviewed with particular emphasis on those actions leading up the re-registration of eleven Kuwaiti oil tankers under the American flag. U.S. strategic and operational objectives in this operation are outlined and evaluated. The impact of unfocused political objectives, and the resultantly vague guidance provided to operational commanders is examined.

Introduction

In 1987, the United States embarked on Operation Earnest Will in the Persian Gulf. Established to provide protection to eleven Kuwaiti oil tankers reregistered under the American flag, the operation was originally planned to require only the five ships normally assigned to the U.S. Navy's Middle East Force. No significant hostilities were anticipated. By its conclusion, Earnest Will had grown into a Joint Task Force including more than thirty warships (requiring the effective commitment of roughly half the navy's surface ships and carriers). One U.S. Navy frigate would be severely damaged, and along with numerous small craft, nearly one half of the active Iranian Navy would lay at the bottom of the Gulf.

This paper will attempt to demonstrate that the United States entered into this operation without clearly focused political objectives, and as a result, committed military forces to "very real military action"¹ without adequate operational guidance.

Concerned principally with preventing the expansion of Soviet influence in the area, American actions would grow from a narrow protection of U.S. interests, to an almost tacit alliance with Iraq. Yet without clearly focused political and military objectives, U.S. actions would both fail to satisfy our "friends" in the region, or deter Iranian action.

In the end, Operation Earnest Will was judged a success by many. Yet the attacks on Gulf shipping ended in 1988 not as a result of American military action, but as a byproduct of Iran and Iraq's acceptance of a UN negotiated cease fire.

¹ Michael A. Palmer, Guardians of the Gulf, (New York, The Free Press, 1992), 124.
Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger quoted in an address to the Portland World Affairs Council, 21 Sept, 1987.

The Iran-Iraq war

In September 1980, the Iraqi Army invaded Iran to regain control of the Shatt Al-Arab waterway that it had partially ceded to Iran in the 1975 Algiers Agreement.² Iraq proved unable to achieve the quick victory that many had predicted, and the resulting war of attrition lasted for eight years, included the use of chemical weapons, and resulted in up to 1.5 million casualties.

Iraqi attacks on commercial shipping bound to or from Iran began in 1981 in the northern Persian Gulf. These attacks continued into 1984 without eliciting a corresponding response from Iran. In that year, with the ground war at a stalemate, Iraq declared a blockade of Iran. Significantly increasing the number of ship attacks, Baghdad sent its forces farther and farther south in the Gulf in an attempt to strangle Iran economically and force an end to the fighting.³ Iraq's oil terminals in the Gulf had been destroyed early in the war, and as a result, most Iraqi oil was exported by way of pipelines through Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Without direct access to the sea, Iraq was also dependent on friendly regional nations (in particular Kuwait) for the transshipment of economic goods and war materials. Unable to strike a return blow against Iraqi shipping, Iran began attacks on neutral shipping in May 1984, concentrating on ships bound to or from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (table 1).⁴

² Efrain Karsh, ed., The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications, (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1989), 28.

³ Ronald O'Rourke, "The Tanker War," U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, May 1988, 30; Janice Gross Stein, "The Wrong Strategy in the Right Place," International Security, Winter 1988/89, 147.

⁴ Farhang Rajaei, ed., The Iran-Iraq War: The Politics of Aggression, (Gainesville, FL, University Press of Florida, 1993), 123-125.

Table 1 *Attacks on Ships in the Arabian Gulf Region by Belligerent, 1981-1988*

Attacker	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	Total
Iraq	5	22	16	53	33	66	89	38	322
Iran	0	0	0	18	14	45	92	52	221
Total	5	22	16	71	47	111	181	90	543

Source: O'Rourke, "Gulf Ops," in U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, May 1989.

To this point in the war, the United States had remained essentially neutral, providing only rhetorical and some military support (in the form of weapons sales) to a number of Gulf Cooperation Council countries.⁵ The Reagan Administration viewed the escalating activity in the Gulf with concern. In September 1983, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, Robert H. Pelletreau, outlined the Administration's position:

The longer this war of attrition lasts, the greater the risks will be that either Iran or Iraq will risk some desperate military escalation in the Gulf that would widen the war. We would regard as especially serious any threat by either party to interfere with free navigation or act in any way that would restrict oil exports from the Gulf.

I wish to emphasize, as we have made clear to both Iran and Iraq, that the unrestricted flow of oil from the Gulf is vital to the entire international community. Our commitment to freedom of commerce and navigation in the international waters of the Gulf is firm. Even if Iran and Iraq cannot come to grips with the basic issues that divide them and to make peace, we expect them to respect this principle.⁶

In response to the attacks on shipping bound for neutral Kuwaiti and Saudi ports in 1984, the United States supported United Nations Security Council Resolution 552, condemning Iran. The State Department warned that the security of America's "moderate Arab friends" as well as western oil supplies was threatened by the widening war.⁷ As 1984 came to a close,

⁵ Karsh, 171.

⁶ Palmer, 118-119.

⁷ Ibid.

Iraq, seeing no hope for victory on the battlefield, began to look for a diplomatic solution to the conflict. As a result of this change in tack, the United States resumed diplomatic relations with Baghdad.⁸ Iraq now participated actively in discussions on ending the war at the United Nations, while Iran remained aloof.

Throughout 1985, there was little progress in either the ground war or on the diplomatic front. Both sides were somewhat more restrained in their attacks on Gulf shipping. This stalemate lasted until the spring of 1986, when Iranian forces overran the Al-Faw peninsula and threatened the capture of Basra. Sensing the potential for defeat, Iraq dramatically expanded its attacks on Iranian shipping. These attacks significantly disrupted the Iranian oil industry and thereby weakened its economy.⁹ To strike back at Iraq economically, Iran had three potential courses of action: to attack western and Soviet ships carrying (Iraq bound) war material to Kuwaiti ports; to attack the pipelines carrying Iraqi oil in Saudi Arabia and Turkey;¹⁰ or to strike indirectly by attacking the tankers transiting to or from the countries that were supporting Iraq financially.¹¹ Iran viewed joining the tanker war as the option with the least risk. By August 1986, the U.S. intelligence community had determined that the focal point for Iran's pressure would be Kuwait. Iranian actions against Kuwait soon included terrorist attacks on Kuwaiti territory, the mining of Kuwaiti shipping channels, and the deployment of Silkworm missiles aimed at Kuwait.¹²

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Rajaei, 123-125.

¹⁰ In the former case, potentially challenging the Reagan corollary to the Carter Doctrine (defending the free flow of oil from Saudi Arabia), while the later would constitute a direct attack on a NATO member.

¹¹ Palmer, 121.

¹² Casper W. Weinberger, Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon, (New York, Warner Books Inc., 1990), 387-388.

The American response was complicated by two factors. First, the Administration had experienced great difficulty in persuading Congress to approve the sale of military equipment to Arab states (often denied out of concern for Israeli security). More significantly, in November 1986, information related to the Iran-Contra affair began to appear. Congressional hearings at the time began to publicly reveal that the United States had been pushing for a UN arms embargo against Iran, promising support to friendly Arab states, publicly "tilting" towards Iraq, warning the Iranians not to expand the tanker war, all while delivering planeloads of antitank and antiaircraft missiles to Tehran.¹³

The Kuwaiti Request

In December of 1986, the Government of Kuwaiti began contacting the permanent members of the UN Security Council searching for help in protecting its shipping. They had initially sought assistance from the Soviet Union (requesting reflagging of five Kuwaiti Oil Tanker Company (KOTC) vessels), partly in the belief that the Soviets could act more quickly than the Americans, and partly because Iran-Contra made them suspicious of American intentions in the Gulf.¹⁴ The Soviets responded without hesitation that they would be willing to reflag and protect the Kuwaiti tankers.

Washington could not reach a conclusion so easily, as indicated by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral William Crowe:

¹³ Palmer, 121-122. Then Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger commented on the proposed transfer of arms to Iran (National Security Decision Directive 5-84): "Inasmuch as Iran was responsible for the taking and holding of a number of our citizens as hostages, was continuing to pour out the most venomous anti-American, anti-Western propaganda, and had demonstrated its basically barbaric conduct in Lebanon and elsewhere, I felt that this was one of the more absurd proposals yet to be circulated...that this would be similar to asking Qadaffi over for a cozy lunch." See Weinberger, Fighting for Peace, 362-363.

¹⁴ Karsh, 173.

The fact was that the administration simply did not have a consistent point of view on the region. In particular, there was no coherent approach to the Iran-Iraq war, beyond a devout hope that it would go away. Nor was there any desire to jeopardize the Middle East Force's traditional neutrality. Even the Navy was not inclined to inject its units into the storm. The general feeling was that we did not want to complicate the problem further by American intervention. No one could predict where that might lead.¹⁵

Within the Administration, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and National Security Advisor Frank Carlucci emerged as strong advocates of not only reflagging the six KOTC vessels proposed by Kuwait, but of protecting all the Kuwaiti tankers *regardless of flag*. Secretary Weinberger's principal concern was preventing the expansion of Soviet power and influence in the Gulf.¹⁶ He would later reiterate:

I recognized that the option of American flagging would be politically more difficult to fulfill, but the basic effect was the same. *No difference in our naval forces would be required* to protect the shipping; and it seemed immaterial to me whether the Kuwaiti ships were reflagged or not. To my mind the main thing was for us to protect the right of innocent, nonbelligerent and extremely important commerce to move freely in international open waters—and, by our offering that protection, to avoid conceding the mission to the Soviets.¹⁷

Although Secretary of State George Shultz was opposed, the President agreed to protect all Kuwaiti shipping. When advised of the American decision, Kuwait indicated that it preferred to put all eleven tankers under the U.S. flag, and the registration process began.¹⁸ The decision had been made with little input from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and operational planners were not consulted until after the fact.¹⁹

¹⁵ William J. Crowe, The Line of Fire, (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1993), 174.

¹⁶ Ibid., 177.

¹⁷ Weinberger, Fighting for Peace, 397. Emphasis added.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Karsh, 195.

The Administration's task of selling the reflagging plan to a skeptical Congress and the American public became more difficult following the Iraqi attack on the USS Stark (FFG-31).²⁰

Operation Earnest Will

In a June 1987 report to Congress, Secretary Weinberger laid out the U.S. objectives (national/strategic) in the Gulf: denying Soviet access/influence in the region; ensuring the stability and security of the Gulf states; and ensuring access to Gulf oil resources.²¹ The report opened by stating that "Protecting eleven Kuwaiti ships under U.S. flag is not part of an open-ended unilateral American commitment to defend all non-belligerent shipping in the Persian Gulf."²² The report appears to contradict itself only four pages later when it states that "The missions we have accepted, the protection of U.S.-flag tankers as well as keeping the Strait of Hormuz open for unimpeded access to oil, are declared U.S. objectives," apparently without regard to flag.²³

The first (and primary to the Administration) of these national strategic objectives was preventing any increase in Soviet access and influence in the Gulf. This objective was extremely broad in scope, and would drive many decisions during this period, beginning with the reflagging operation itself. One cannot note without irony, that to achieve this objective the United States was, in effect, guarantying the flow of capital to Iraq (by way of loans from

²⁰ On 17 May 1987, an Iraqi Mirage F-1 mistakenly fired two Exocet missiles into the Stark, nearly sinking her and killing 37 sailors. See Palmer, 123.

²¹ Caspar W. Weinberger, A Report to the Congress on Security Arrangements in the Persian Gulf (Washington, 1987), i.

²² Ibid. Emphasis in original.

²³ Ibid., v. Emphasis in original.

Kuwait and Saudi Arabia) for the purchase of weapons from its long time friend and patron, the Soviet Union.²⁴

Ensuring the stability and security of the Gulf states is such an expansive and ill-defined objective, that almost any policy action (or inaction) could be attributed to it.

Finally, "keeping the Strait of Hormuz open for unimpeded access to oil," appears in spirit, if not fact, to be the very open-ended unilateral American commitment that Secretary Weinberger insists it is not.

The Secretary's report also specifically delineated the U.S. Navy's mission:

MIDEASTFOR's primary mission has been and will continue to be to provide military presence in order to protect U.S. interests and provide a rapid response capability in contingencies. Other missions include assisting friendly regional states, protecting U.S.-flagged vessels, maintaining safe passage of U.S.-flagged shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, and preserving U.S. and allied access to vital resources in the region. MIDEASTFOR is tasked with providing protection to U.S.-flagged vessels including the reflagged Kuwaiti vessels sailing within or transiting through the international waters of the Gulf of Oman, Strait of Hormuz, and the Persian Gulf. The continued presence of U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf signals U.S. resolve in the area and acts as a moderating element with regard to the Iran-Iraq war.²⁵

A number of these operational objectives were clearly defined, focused, and achievable with the augmented force levels (nine MIDEASTFOR surface combatants) then planned. These included: military presence and rapid response capability; protecting U.S.-flagged vessels; and maintaining safe passage of U.S.-flagged shipping through the Strait of Hormuz.

The remaining objectives were more problematic. "Providing assistance to friendly regional states" is so nebulous an objective at the operational level that it provides no real guidance to the commander. While COMIDEASTFOR was tasked with preserving U.S. and allied access to vital oil resources in the region, who those allies were was never specified. A careful

²⁴ James Webb, "Milo Minderbinder Would Be Impressed," The Wall Street Journal, 18 July 1988, A-8.

reading of the document would seem to indicate that the United Kingdom, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, and Japan were considered allies for the purpose of this objective. Not addressed were other U.S. allies (for example Korea and Greece), or non-allied nations (such as Liberia) under whose flag of convenience many western owned vessels sailed.

The most controversial objective remained the protection of the reflagged Kuwaiti tankers. Once reflagged, the responsibility of COMIDEASTFOR to protect those vessels as any other U.S.-flagged vessel is clear. Yet the political and strategic implications of the reflagging would have a dramatic impact on the commander's execution of that mission. While from a legal perspective, the reflagged Kuwaiti tankers were no different from any other U.S.-flagged vessel, the Iranians held a different view.

Throughout the tanker war, Iran had never attacked a U.S.-flagged merchant or warship. Nevertheless, the Iranian Prime Minister made it quite clear that the reflagged vessels changed the situation: "If Kuwait thinks it can help Saddam and still remain safe under the superpowers' flag, it is mistaken."²⁶ The forces initially assigned to Operation Earnest Will were adequate to achieve this objective (protection of reflagged tankers) only if it was assumed that Iran would not respond militarily to such a clear threat to her interests, a questionable assumption at best. Even the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff admitted that "reflagging and convoying Kuwaiti tankers would not be a neutral action."²⁷

There was opposition to the operation on several fronts. In July of 1987, the Secretary of the Navy, James Webb, sent a memo to Secretary Weinberger voicing his concerns, which

²⁵ Weinberger, Security Arrangements in the Persian Gulf, 15.

²⁶ Karsh, 179.

included: the fact that there were no clear objectives and therefore the Administration would not be able to achieve or maintain public support; that they could not expect support from allies or friends; and that we would never be able to know when “we had won.” Secretary Weinberger’s “clear and simple” response was that the United States would have achieved its objective “each time a commercial ship with non-belligerent commerce went back and forth in the international waters of the Gulf without being subject to attack, indiscriminate or otherwise, from Iran.”²⁸ This appears valid only at the tactical level (if at all), and in no way serves to clarify strategic or operational objectives.

Congressional concerns were later expressed in a Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff report:

The United States seriously risks being drawn into the war in the Persian Gulf. Although the stated purpose of the huge American fleet in the region is narrowly defined—to escort U.S.-flagged vessels through the Gulf—this mission, given the circumstances, is dangerously nebulous.

The U.S. is perceived by Iranians and Arabs alike as having sided with Iraq, and the expanded U.S. naval presence is likely to invite more Iranian attacks of increasing severity. Moreover, the greater the Iraqi assault on Iranian shipping, the greater the likelihood of Iranian retaliation against U.S. forces. Thus, American naval forces in the Gulf are now, in effect, hostage to Iraqi war policy.²⁹

Convoy Operations

The initial convoy departed from the Gulf of Oman en route Kuwait on 21 July 1987, with two reflagged vessels escorted by three U.S. warships. When one of those vessels, the reflagged tanker Bridgeton struck a mine near Farsi Island, it became immediately apparent that assumptions regarding Iranian intentions and capabilities had been wrong.

²⁷ Crowe, 184. This is in direct contradiction to Secretary Weinberger’s report to Congress which stated that “the United States will be in full compliance with international law concerning neutrality and the use of force.” See Weinberger, Security Arrangements in the Persian Gulf, 22.

²⁸ Weinberger, Fighting for Peace, 401-402.

²⁹ Palmer, 125.

Having failed to deter Iran from escalating the war in the Gulf, the Administration realized that the forces currently assigned to the operation were inadequate and began a dramatic buildup. By the end of the year, U.S. forces in the region (for an operation originally planned to require only the five Middle East Force ships) would include more than thirty warships (including an aircraft carrier and battleship), fifteen patrol boats, two mobile sea bases (barges), a 400-man Marine Air Ground Task Force, Army MH-6 and OH-58 helicopters, SEALs, Air Force AWACS, and aerial tanker support.³⁰ In addition, the command arrangements for these forces were completely reorganized and the Joint Task Force Middle East established.³¹

The United States took no action against Iran following the Bridgeton mining. Secretary Weinberger indicated that "we considered retaliation, but decided to show restraint."³² What message this was intended to send to the Iranians is unclear, but over the next month mines were laid not only throughout the Gulf, but in the convoy staging areas of the Gulf of Oman as well.³³

The Bridgeton incident should have demonstrated to the Administration that the Iranians (or at a minimum more radical Iranian commanders in the field) were not deterred by the mere presence of American warships. Yet, absent clear strategic and operational objectives, the

³⁰ Ibid., 132. To maintain peacetime operational and personnel tempo objectives, the navy had to commit about seven ships (in workups, transits, post-deployment stand down, or maintenance) for each ship actually on patrol in the Gulf. For details on forces commitments see Palmer, 137.

³¹ For details on the difficulties in establishing the Joint Task Force Middle East see Crowe, 187-191.

³² Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, 404.

³³ Karsh, 180.

United States chose to continuously sweep the Gulf for mines, rather than take action to eliminate Iran's ability to lay them.³⁴

In October, U.S. Army helicopters operating from a Navy frigate detected an Iranian vessel, the Iran Ajr, laying mines in the shipping channel. The helicopters attacked the ship which was then seized by the Navy. Afterwards, the crew was returned to Iran and the vessel was sunk. Once again, this time with incontrovertible evidence that Iran was responsible for mining the Gulf, no action was taken to destroy Iranian mine laying capability. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff indicated that "we wanted to convey to the Iranians that we regarded this as a single incident which we had no desire to prolong or escalate."³⁵ This seems inexplicable given the fact that Iran had been laying mines throughout the Gulf for months. The message could clearly have been read in Teheran that there was little risk in continuing to mine the Gulf, that the United States would only take action if it actually caught the minelayers in the act, and that that action would be limited to destruction of the minelaying platform. Since Iran had numerous potential minelaying platforms (including the dhows that traverse the Gulf by the thousands), it is little surprise they remained undeterred. Attacks on neutral shipping continued (table 2).

Table 2 *Attacks on Ships in the Persian Gulf by Month, 1987*

	<i>Jan</i>	<i>Feb</i>	<i>Mar</i>	<i>Apr</i>	<i>May</i>	<i>Jun</i>	<i>Jul</i>	<i>Aug</i>	<i>Sep</i>	<i>Oct</i>	<i>Nov</i>	<i>Dec</i>	<i>Total</i>
Iran	6	3	4	4	10	5	4	5	16	7	10	17	91
Iraq	6	8	5	7	5	2	3	4	12	13	8	15	88

Source: O'Rourke, "The Tanker War," in U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, May 1988.

³⁴ Webb, A-8.

³⁵ Crowe, 198.

By the spring of 1988, U.S. Navy leaders were beginning to look for a way out. Unfortunately, a navy staff study had concluded that the "outcome/resolution of Iran-Iraq war [sic] is the key...The sheer scale of the land war makes it apparent that the Persian Gulf war is, ultimately, a *sideshow* to the war that counts for the two protagonists."³⁶ A State Department official had expressed similar concerns a few months earlier: "The Iraqis can expand the war at any moment, but we cannot translate our presence into bringing the war to an end. We've boxed ourselves into a situation which was initiated by Kuwait, is now driven by Iraq and is ultimately dependent upon Iran."³⁷

On 14 April, the USS Samuel B Roberts (FFG-58) was nearly cut in two by an Iranian mine in the central Persian Gulf. A few days later, additional Iranian manufactured mines were discovered in areas of the central Gulf routinely transited by U.S. Navy vessels.³⁸

Praying Mantis

One of the response options proposed by the Commander, Joint Task Force Middle East, was to strike directly at Iranian assets capable of laying mines, mine storage depots, and other targets that would make further mining more difficult.³⁹ Washington, more concerned with avoiding escalation, while at the same time attempting to impress the American public with the appearance of strong leadership, chose to attack two oil platforms and an Iranian naval

³⁶ Palmer, 137. Emphasis in original.

³⁷ Karsh, 183.

³⁸ Palmer, 137.

³⁹ Ibid., 139.

vessel.⁴⁰ The action was code-named Operation Praying Mantis. Still undeterred, the Iranians chose to put up a fight, and in the skirmishes that followed lost half their active navy.

Although attacking a producing oil platform was not viewed as provocative by U.S. planners, from Teheran's perspective the American warships were now doing exactly what the Iraqi Air Force had been doing for years. Coming on the same day as Iraq's assault to retake the Al-Faw peninsula, Iran could easily have seen the U.S. strike as a clear embrace of Iraqi policy.⁴¹

This view could only have been reinforced two weeks later, when the United States announced that its ships would now offer protection to all friendly and neutral nonbelligerent shipping operating outside recognized war exclusion zones. It had only been nine months since Secretary Weinberger had stated that the reflagging operation was "not part of an open-ended unilateral American commitment to defend all non-belligerent shipping in the Persian Gulf." ⁴²

While the change in policy had been urged by U.S. Naval commanders, and was viewed by defense planners as a way of taking "the moral high ground," ⁴³ it does not seem consistent with the carefully articulated neutrality of Secretary Weinberger's policy statement:

The escort plan itself, and the ROE [rules of engagement] applicable to U.S. naval and air operations in the Persian Gulf, are carefully designed in recognition of principles of international law limiting the threat or use of force. Our Gulf naval presence in the past has not proved, nor is it intended in future to be, provocative. It poses no threat to belligerents.

⁴⁰ Crowe, 201. Admiral Crowe's account of the targets selected (three oil platforms and any naval vessels which ventured out) differs from that of other sources (including those who participated in the operation). See Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, 425, and Karsh, 189.

⁴¹ Karsh, 189-190. At the time of the attack, the Sirri platform was responsible for roughly eight percent of Iran's oil exports.

⁴² Weinberger, *Security Arrangements in the Persian Gulf*, i.

⁴³ Karsh, 190. Having participated in "distress assistance" operations, the author can testify to the strong desire on the part of U.S. forces in the Gulf to intervene in Iranian (in particular, Revolutionary Guard) attacks on defenseless merchant vessels.

In accordance with our inherent legal right to employ proportional military force as necessary in self-defense, the United States will act only in the face of attack, or hostile intent indicating imminent attack, against warships or commercial vessels of its flag.

Therefore, the United States will be in full compliance with international law concerning neutrality and the use of force. Neither the tankers nor their U.S. escorts will be legitimate objects of attack, and the United States will exercise the right to use reasonable force only to protect them from attack.⁴⁴

The clear implication of this change in policy (protecting all nonbelligerent shipping) is that the United States was no longer a neutral party. Yet there was no policy debate, no public statement to this effect, and no new objectives were provided to military commanders.

On 3 July, while providing radar coverage of the Strait of Hormuz in support of the expanded protection policy, the cruiser USS Vincennes (CG-49) responded to a request for assistance from two neutral tankers being harassed by Iranian small craft. During the ensuing engagement, the cruiser would mistakenly down an Iranian civilian airliner with 290 passengers onboard.⁴⁵

On 18 July, Iran agreed to UN Resolution 598 establishing a cease fire and initiating negotiations for a settlement. In his letter of acceptance, the Iranian President referred to the airliner tragedy, and asserted that the war had "now gained unprecedented dimensions, bringing other countries into the war and even engulfing innocent civilians."⁴⁶

Conclusion

It seems clear that the United States embarked on Operation Earnest Will without clear and focused political objectives. Concerned with potential Soviet expansion in the Persian Gulf, the Administration committed itself to a policy without proper analysis of its implications

⁴⁴ Weinberger, Security Arrangements in the Persian Gulf, 21-22.

⁴⁵ Palmer, 144-148.

⁴⁶ Karsh, 191.

concerning the Iran-Iraq war. As a result, American policy became hostage to the desires of its "friends" in the region, and the actions of the belligerents.

U.S. forces in the region found themselves involved in "very real military action," with vague operational objectives. The mission grew from protection of U.S.-flagged vessels, to an open-ended commitment to protect all shipping from Iranian attack with no indication of when that mission would be complete. The nebulous nature of public statements regarding U.S. goals in the region, and the inconsistent use of force in support of those goals, only served to exacerbate this problem.

In the end, the free and unmolested flow of shipping returned to the Gulf not as a result of American military protection, but as a consequence of Iranian exhaustion. U.S. actions (both diplomatic and military) certainly contributed to that outcome, but mostly at the margins. It is ironic that the one American action which may have most have influenced Iran to end the war was the accidental downing of the civilian airliner.

This paper in no way intends to question the validity of U.S. engagement in the middle east or the Persian Gulf in particular. It remains critical however, that American political and military objectives be well defined, clearly focused and achievable by the forces committed to the region. Absent that, we are as in this case, left to rely on luck.

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